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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted in an elementary school to test the theory that teacher's self-described "worst classes" were those with a predominance of remedial reading students. Predictions of worst classes were made upon the basis of the schedules of students in the school reading laboratory. Designated teachers were asked to identify, using criteria of their own choosing, which was their "worst" class. During interviews with the teachers, the theory was supported, but it seemed likely that the presence of a significant group of reluctant readers in a class was only one of several characteristics that made it teacher's "worst." Other common factors were found to be: (1) a higher ratio of male to females students; (2) a higher incidence of students from the lowest academic rank; (3) a large number of repeating students; (4) a large number of repeaters who are simultaneously taking two or more sequential courses in the same subject; and (5) class scheduled late in the day. The identification of patterns characteristic of "worst classes" can be useful in alleviating some of the teachers' problems. It becomes imperative, for instance, that a teacher be aware of the sequence of learning that a student, because of repeating the class, may be experiencing. Classes that build upon prior knowledge will suffer if they are taken concurrently. Moreover, simple scheduling changes can modify many of the "worst class" patterns. (KH)

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ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE WORST CLASS SYNDROME

by

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This paper is submitted to
Dr. Jane White in fulfillment
of the requirements for the course
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The worst class synrdome can be identified by several common characteristics.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A "WORST CLASS" SYNDROME"

I. Introduction

I began the research for this paper focusing on the behavior of one student, Charles. Charles had been in my reading lab the entire previous year and failed with a very low grade. Although there is another reading teacher, for the convenience of scheduling, he was placed in my class again. I decided to concentrate on watching his behavior to determine in what specific way it was not conducive to learning. His behavior was characterized by an incredibly short ability to attend to work, examples of no awareness of the difference between "teacher time" and "student time" or his "student time" and the "student time" of another. He also demonstrated no "social" awareness, i.e., what is appropriate and what is not in the environment of a classroom. He often belched aloud, impulsively spoke off topic, and would even get out of his seat. Nor did he learn from experience the acceptable patterns of behavior. Each day, upon entering the class, Charles would ask me if he could go to the bathroom. Every day I would say no. Yet he continued to ask - day after day, and now, year after year. His learning was nil.

The class he was in consisted of only eight students, including Charles. I suspected that to observe the behavior of the other seven students would be informative, but Charles' behavior was so outlandish that the behavior of the others faded into the background. I decided then to observe Charles in other classes. I selected his math class for two reasons: the teacher complained at lunch and in general conversation that this was her worst class, and it was convenient because it was my planning period. What I

observed was a turning point in my research. This math class was a large class consisting of many "Charles'" and therefore it was Charles who this time faded into the background. Charles, of course, was suspicious of my presence in this math class. I believe it crossed his mind that I was there to watch him. As the class entered, many of the students whom I have or have had in reading labs like Charles' class, came immediately over to where I was sitting and asked questions like, "Are you teaching today?" or "What are you doing in a math class?" Charles was very conspicuous in his lack of reaction to my presence in that class. This makes me suspect he was aware that I was there to observe him. Although when the others asked, I was loud, clear, and definite in answering that I was observing not just them, but various classes for a course I was taking. I realized immediately however, that I would not be able to observe Charles in his other classes. To appear in another of his classes would be much too obvious. I did find it valuable that this class should be identified by the teacher as her "worst class" and that it should contain many of the core "reading class" students. This connection led me to phase two of my research which was to determine if there were any relationships between those classes that teachers would identify as their "worst classes" and the predominence of remedial reading students. I believed I could predict which was the worst class for selected teachers based on analyzing the schedules of the students in the reading lab. I gathered their schedules and determined where groups of five or more of these students were placed in other classes and predicted that these would be the "worst" classes of the day for those teachers. Therefore, the "group" to be studied became the "worst" classes of selected teachers based on the incidence of remedial readers in their classes.

The breakdown in schedules looked like this:

1st Period:
- *Industrial Arts - Mr. H.
  - Scott H.
  - Frank K.
  - Gary C.
  - Joe S.
  - Brian C.
- English 9 - Mrs. F.
  - Angie H.
  - Jean S.
  - Vincent H.
- Agriculture 1 - Mrs. L.
  - Karen H.
  - Mike S.
- Social Studies II - Mr. G.
  - Jim M.
  - Angie S.
  - Dennis M.
  - Eric M.

2nd Period:
- *My class - Reading Lab

3rd Period:
- Introduction to Biology - Ms. J.
  - Angie S.
  - Angie H.
- Earth Science - Mr. Hv.
  - Mike S.
  - Karen H.
- *Math 1 - Ms. H.
  - Scott H.
  - Frank K.
  - Gary C.
  - Joe S.
  - Brian C.

4th Period:
- Gym - Mrs. W.
  - Angie H.
  - Sharon C.
  - Jean S.
- *Biology - Mrs. Hl.
  - Brian C.
  - Joe S.
  - Frank K.
  - Scott H.
  - Gary C.

5th Period:
U.S. Studies II - Mr. S.
Gary C.
Jean S.
Vince H.
General Math - Mr. M.
Angie H.
Mike S.
Eric M.
*English 9 - Mr. Hrt.
Joe S.
Frank K.
Scott H.
Michelle B.

6th Period:
*Gym - Mr. S.
Brian C.
Bill M.
Joe S.
Mike S.
Frank K.
Scott H.
Dennis M.
Gary C.

7th Period:
Biology - Mrs. Hl.
Angie S.
Jean S.
Karen H.
Vince H.
*U.S. Studies II - Mr. P.
Mike S.
Frank K.
Scott H.
Angie H.
Michelle B.

The starred (*) classes were those I predicted would be the "worst" class of the day for that teacher based on the incidence of remedial readers in that class.

The term "remedial reader" or "reluctant reader" is used in this paper to identify students with one or all of the following characteristics: reading three or more grade levels below their actual grade level; presence

in a reading lab; simultaneous special education being received; those identified as potential failures on the Maryland Functional Reading Test. I've used the term "significant group" to identify where five or more of these students occur.

II. Definition of the Scope and Purpose of this Field Study

The next step was to confirm or disprove my theory. I asked each of the designated teachers to identify, using criteria of their own choosing, which was their "worst" class. The term "criteria of your own choosing" became important in relationship to the purpose of this paper because it was not my intent to define to teachers what constituted a "worst" class but rather for them to identify their "worst" class and through analyses of them, determine the possibility of common characteristics. During the interviews with those six designated teachers, my theory of the incidence of a significant group of remedial readers in a class to the likelihood of that class being identified by the teacher as his worst class was proven. The one inconsistency, Mr. Ht's 5th period class, was not what he chose as his "worst". The reasons given for this, as well as information supplied by the other five teachers, led me to conclude that a significant group of reluctant readers occurring in a particular class was only one characteristic in establishing which was a teacher's "worst" class and that in order to qualify, the class would have several of a select group of characteristics. My research then entered its third and final stage in the evolution of its focus. The key problem would be "what are the characteristics of a 'worst' class?" This is a significant question because as I discovered through this research, regardless of what kind of schedule a teacher has, they always have a "worst" class. Determining what it is that characterizes the "worst"

class syndrome (which is the purpose of this paper) will help each teacher to deal with those characteristics and will also help those who can affect changes within the system to do so in consideration of these characteristics.

III. Field Work Methods

Entry was suprisingly simple. Initially I wrote a letter to my principal (see Appendix) identifying the purpose of my studies, what I would be involved in doing, and the assurance of the complete anonymity of all my findings. He gave me his approval.

What I had thought would be difficult - gaining entry to individual teacher's classes - turned out to be an unwarranted fear. Every teacher I approached was more than willing to allow me to observe. They were also interested in the research I was doing. Their cooperation was complete.

There were several field work methods utilized in this study. Ongoing interviews of teachers and students were conducted and I also conducted a total of nine classroom observations of eight different classes (one class was so bad, I observed it again). This involved eight different teachers and five different subjects. I also distributed surveys to the teachers and separate surveys to students, providing information that gave orientation to my study.

Data was selected on the basis of behaviors (both student and teacher's) that were not conducive to learning, using twenty of the sixty-one "Dimensions for Comparing Known Sample Classrooms" from Tikisnoff, Berliner and Rists "Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study Know Sample" (1975). All comments from surveys and interviews were also gathered and categorized for establishment of patterns.

IV. The Description

"As I and students entered the business class scheduled to begin in three minutes, the teacher leaned busily over a desk working something out on paper. I and the others were struck by the fact that the lights were out and she worked in darkness, seemingly oblivious to the strangeness of that occurrence. The unabashed students entering this environment were not reticent in yelling out as they approached, 'What happened to the lights?' Student after student, as he or she entered, repeated this. As this was an entre to further discussion, the crescendo of the group continued to grow as the group grew in size." This was the opening vignette of a class I observed containing a significant group of reluctant readers. The teacher identified it as her "worst" class. A question immediately presented itself upon witnessing this scene: What are the characteristics of this "worst" class that prohibits the teacher from getting a handle on the situation and allowing a "worst" class to exits?

This class was not unlike the other seven classes I observed. The "significant group of reluctant readers" who were the impetus for this research were in small reading labs averaging six students per class but their other classes were, I found, averaging between fifteen and twenty students. These would be considered average size classes since academic classes tend to be above thirty students and special instruction classes, i.e., Special Education, Communications Lab, etc., tend to average around six students.

These classes were average in size but in no way were they average in ability. It is, unfortunately, the group in which half of our school's

students are placed. On a levelling scale of 1 - 4, with 1 being the highest academic group, these are level 4.

A brief description of the process is in order. Level One is a college bound group and consists of the top thirty out of two hundred in the class. Although there is a tremendous range of ability within this group itself, they all share the desire for acquiring the prerequisite knowledge for college. Levels Two and Three are not college bound. Most will work after graduation, a few will pursue college. Level Four is the lowest level of ability and achievement. These students will become manual laborers, store clerks, and other limited skill workers.

Students are placed in these levels based on the determination of their English teacher. Upon entering high school, standardized test scores from middle school as well as the evaluation of their eighth grade English teacher determines their level. From then on, their current high school English teacher determines annually whether or not they are appropriately placed, or should move up or down. The criteria for being placed in a Level 4 class is that a student reads three or more grade levels below his actual grade. This is the level class in which the remedial reading students are placed for their other subjects and therefore this was the level which I observed.

The first pattern emerging from my research was my ability to predict a select group of teachers' "worst" classes based on the occurrence of a significant group of reluctant readers in those classes. My predictions which coincided with the teachers' own selection of that class as his or her "worst" class of the day (based on information provided in Part I of this paper) are those that are stressed.

*Mr. P - U.S. Studies II - 7th period
*Mr. S - Gym - 6th period
Mr. Hrt. - English 9 - 5th period
*Ms. Hl. - Biology - 4th period
*Ms. Hts. - Math I - 3rd period
*Mr. H. - Industrial Arts - 1st period

These predictions were bases as stated previously on an analysis of reading students' schedules. The research at this point preceded the in-class observation I conducted, but at this point it was clear that in five out of six cases the occurrence of a significant group of reluctant readers in a class was a common characteristic of "worst classes". Why was Mr. Hrt.'s English 9 class 5th period not his "worst" class? Through interviews with him and the other teachers involved, several additional patterns begin to emerge.

Mr. Hrt. reasoned that although his 5th period class was academically very poor, it was not his "worst" class because it was basically all girls. Instead, he chose as his "worst" class his 7th period class which had twice as many boys as girls in it. He also felt that 7th period was his choice because of the time of day. He stated "the last period of the day means teachers' as well as students' exhaustion is at a peak." These two characteristics will be addressed at great length in later paragraphs.

All of the reading students' classes that I had chosen were, of course, in Level 4. Since these remedial readers were a limited number of students and only affected therefore a limited number of teachers - I wondered what the teachers of classes which did not have a significant number of remedial readers would determine were characteristics of their "worst" classes. Mr. Hrt.'s comments as well as the comments of all those I interviewed provided several insights.

Attitude was another factor consistently mentioned. Although it is the

most affected by conditions and situations outside the school system and least controlled by focus within the system, because of the high frequency of responses incorporating this it must be considered a characteristic pattern. Teachers cited a lack of motivation as one attitude problem. They stated that some students had been socially promoted, and some had no intention of graduating. Many students come from what teachers identified as "bad homes". The math teacher referred to in the opening vignette of this section has in that class a brother and half-sister. There are obvious problems at home as one refers to the mother as "the bitch". This attitude then carries over into their school work. Another problem relating to home is that teachers can not get in touch with parents and there is also infrequent follow-up carried through by parents. Teachers also said that students are "mean to each other". This I also noted during one of my observations. A girl sitting in front of me asked another girl next to her, "How do you spell 'receive'?" She got no answer. So she said aloud "Is it r-e-c-e-i?" "Yes!" was the vehement response of the girl being queried. "I've only told you 12 times!"

More structural patterns can be identified as characteristics of the "worst" classes. Since the reading class students were in Level 4 and these were identified as "worst" classes, was there a relationship between other Level 4 classes and the "worst" class syndrome? Research indicated that there definitely was. Of ten teacher responding to my survey, it is very clear that the level of the class affects their selection as the "worst" class. A breakdown is as follows:

Level				
1	2	3	4	5-6 (Special Education)
1*	-	1*	7*	1*

*Response (selecting this level as their worst class)

The one teacher who selected a Level 1 or academic class as her "worst" class did so for reasons that are entirely unique to her situation and therefore can be discounted. She teaches Latin and in that class the school has combined Latin III and IV and in her words "I have not mastered the art of ubiquity". Therefore, it is the "worst" class of her day. Other than this, it is clear that the lower the academic level, the more likely the class is to be a teacher's "worst" class.

Another pattern that seems clear cut among those classes teachers consider their "worst" class is the ratio of male students to female students. As previously stated Mr. Hrt. deemed this more significant than the occurrence of reluctant readers in his class. In the business math class I observed, which the teacher selected as her "worst" class, she had both a significant number of reluctant readers as well as a completely male class.

A complete breakdown of Level 4 classes selected as their "worst" class and the relationships of male/female students in those classes as indicated by ten teachers responding to the survey follows.

It was a unanimous characteristic of those classes that males dominated the classes teachers chose as their "worst" class.

Students repeating a course is a characteristic that also surfaced among those classes teachers identified as their "worst".

In the surveys of the same ten teachers noted above, the following pattern represents a considerable number of repeaters in each class.

Size of Class	Number of Repeaters	Male/Female
21	1	12/9
20	5	15/5
20	8	11/9
22	1	13/9
20	4	13/7
22	4	17/5
24	9	16/8
19	0	13/6
17	0	17/0
24	9	19/5

Although each of the classes does not possess both characteristics, they all represent more males than females and sixty percent of the classes did have a large number of repeaters. When a student fails a Level 2 or 3 class, Guidance drops them down to a Level 4 class. This is inappropriate because not only have they covered the curriculum before, but they have covered a more difficult version of it. Boredom and arrogance, leading to disruption, is the logical result.

There is also a relationship beyween the number of repeaters in á class and those who are simultaneously taking the next course in the academic sequence. This particularly occurs in the English Department which is the only one to have a four-year graduation requirement and therefore if a student fails English, he must either double up with two English courses the following year or attend summer school. Since summer school charges tuition, few attend. The breakdown of survey responses among teachers is as follows:

Size of Class	Number Taking Multiple English Classes
20	5
17	4
29	2
24	10
19	3

Finally, there is a relationship between the period of the day, Level 4 classes, and their selection as a teacher's "worst" class. The two periods of the day which were "worst classes" of the day were Period 4 and Period 7, the last period of the day.

During Period 4, the entire English Department has lunch in the middle of the period. It is a split lunch shift. The classes meet for 25 minutes, break for lunch, and then reassemble for the concluding 25 minutes. To compound this disruptive schedule, teachers' concerns on their surveys indicate that they teach their lowest levels during this period. Of the eight teachers in the English Department: one teaches Level 5 (Reading Lab); three teach Level 3; and, four teach Level 4 (during split lunch shift).

The other period which interviews and surveys indicated were characteristic of "worst" classes was their occurrence the last period of the day. Samples of teachers' comments given to substantiate this were that "no one cares", and "everyone needs to go to the bathroom by then." A breakdown of the "worst" periods of the day chosen by ten teachers responding to the survey indicates a heavy weight at the end of the day.

Period Number Selected:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
-	-	I	3	3	1	2

In a poll of twenty-seven students, the same findings were made.

Period Number Selected:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	2	6	3	5	10

Thus, it is clear that the end of a day is not as fruitful, nor as positive an experience as other times.

V. Conclusion

There occured a three stage evolution in the fine tuning of my thesis topic. Interest in it initially was prompted by the behavior of one student. Through observations of him and discussions with other students and teachers it was apparent that there existed a relationship between the classes that both groups selected as their "worst" class and the occurrence of a significant number of remedial readers in the class. Finally, through surveys, further observations, and interviews with both students and teachers, it was clear that there were several, not just one, common characteristics of the worst class syndrome. In addition to the number of remedial readers in a class, the ratio of males to females in the class with a dominance of males relating to the higher incidence of a class identified as a "worst" class was also a factor. Other patterns that emerged as factors were a high incidence of Level 4 classes, a large number of repeaters in a class, a large number of repeaters who are simultaneously taking two or more sequential courses in the same subject, and finally, the period of the day in which the class actually occurs with the later the day, the more likely the class will be identified as one of the participant groups as their "worst class".

The identification of these factors as patterns characteristic of "worst classes" is useful in several ways. The teacher of a class that becomes his or her "worst" can utilize this information to alleviate some of the problems. For instance, in a class in which there are many repeaters, a teacher may choose to vary the curriculum of the texts and readings that are normally used. This would eliminate a root of the problem which is familiarity and boredom. It is also imperative that a teacher be aware of the sequence of learning that a student, because of repeating the class, may be experiencing. Classes that build upon prior knowledge will suffer if they are taken concurrently. Yet that is occurring all to frequently. Other characteristics of the "worst" class should be helpful to guidance personnel and administrators. Changes in scheduling can alleviate five out of seven factors attributed to the "worst" classes. The most obvious would be not to have a low level class split their lunch shift. They can just as easily eat on the first or last lunch shift and provide the continuity of instruction so necessary, particulary to those who are easily distracted. Also, the academic subjects should be scheduled earlier in the day when concentration and energy levels are at their peak. The number of reluctant readers in each class and the ratio of males to females in that class can also easily be adjusted. The utilization of this information to make these adjustments would create an entirely different environment alleviating the patterns that have been uncovered and thereby helping to alleviate the problem.

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